

Culture of victorian england described in poetry

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Two works that reflect the Victorian Era well are Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover". Both pieces speak to the era and culture of Victorian England. Compared to the twenty-first century, Victorian England seems like a distant and strange land with a seemingly strange and foreign feel until some of the themes are explored. The themes in the pieces capture the emphasis and bearings of Victorian culture through captivating and thoughtful literature that don't seem completely unfamiliar at times, yet can conflict with society's standards today.

In Browning's "Porphyria's Lover", the title doesn't quite sum up how bizarre and yet interesting the work is. Without reading the poem, one may think that it is a love poem. Instead, this work is about the speaker who murders his girlfriend by strangling her with her hair. The speaker then sits and admires the body of the deceased for the remainder of the night. How shocking, yet really thrilling to read! The speaker could be described as cold-blooded or psychotic for committing such acts. This strictly contradicts the poems of Robert Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, who wrote romantic poems that are far more comfortable to read for many readers. This poem reflects the Victorian era in other ways, though. In the last lines of the poem, the narrator says "Porphyria's love: she guessed not how, her darling one wish would be heard. And thus we sit together now and all night long we have not stirred, and yet God has not said a word!" (Browning 713) The last words, "yet God has not said a word", is one of the points in this work that reflects the Victorian era.

The scientific advancements of the Victorian era caused many to defect from the widespread Christian beliefs of the era into a more scientific oriented society. Dr. Andrzej Diniejek states that Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* denied a divine hand in creation. (Diniejek) Diniejek goes on to say that those who read *Origin of Species* inferred that no absolute good or absolute evil exists in the world. (Diniejek) This goes on to theorize that normal moral values are manmade principles. (Diniejek) This radical theory of evolution undermined the value of traditional religion and morality, which had been accepted for centuries as the guiding principle of mankind. (Diniejek) The "godless" society had just begun to take place, and is evident in many works of literature from the time, including Browning's "Porphyria's Lover". This does not mean, though, that Christianity had lost its hold in society. Darwin's theory of evolution just brought more critical thinking and broadened horizons to those of the time. Darwin's work really dove into the study of human nature as well. In "Porphyria's Lover", the narrator committed murder, and many would be deemed completely wrong and immoral. Yet, as stated above, Darwin's theory argues against absolute morals, which makes this work more controversial and even more interesting to some. "

"Porphyria's Lover" really plays upon the reader's moral compass since it is the reader who is passing judgement upon the speaker.

There are other view-points about "Porphyria's Lover" that Catherine Ross explores. Ross suggests that in lines 22-25 that are typically read as a reference to social status ("Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor, to set its struggling passion free from pride, and vainer ties dissever") that the author instead could be referencing the pride and fear of a young lady who knew

the possible consequences if she let her sexual desires run free outside of marriage in an age with no reliable birth control. (Ross 71) Others think that the line references their narrator and Porphyria's difference in social status which could have made the murder take place, since social status was cared about greatly during that time. (Ross 71) Ross also suggests that the poem's last line that references God's silence to reflect Porphyria's concerns, not her lover's, since Porphyria's age of society taught young women that God would disapprove of women freely expressing sexual desire. (Ross 71)

In Tennyson's "Ulysses", the speaker loves to travel and cannot bear to stay in one location for too long. The speaker desires for more than what is available within grasp of mundane life. According to James Nohrnberg, during the time of Tennyson writing this work, the British Empire's East India Trading company was booming. (Nohrnberg 112) The English were also exploring and researching in the Orient, the Congo, Niger and the Nile. (Nohrnberg 112) The speaker in "Ulysses" states "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down", which reflects the fearless attitude of the explorer. (Nohrnberg112) This makes the topic of this work extremely feasible considering all of the exploration that was taking place in Tennyson's time. To have a speaker that was restless and desiring exploration and excitement reflects the era of the period perfectly. However, Tennyson attributed Ulysses determination to triumph over all and to persevere through anything to his own choice to live and carry on after hearing the news of the death of his very good friend. (Nohrnberg 101) The work still has the exploration theme though of exploring new territories woven in, as do many of Tennyson's works that reflect the Victorian era.

Whether it is exploring new places or testing beliefs, there are some things that haven't changed too much from the Victorian era to now. There is still a debate over Darwin's theory of evolution and there are still people exploring the world. Some cultures still shame women for having sexual desires and there are still people who write about psychopaths that kill. It may seem to some that perhaps not too much has changed since the Victorian era.

However, there have been advances made and humanity as a whole has evolved some since then. The works by Tennyson and Browning reflect some of what shaped the Victorian era literature in theme. Tennyson's and Browning's style of writing, though starkly different in content and writing style, are model examples of Victorian era literature.